

Apps, devices and photo books are tailor-made for modern families

In our home, discussions about decor and style are more wishful thinking than actual planning. That beautiful suede sectional could be the key component in our living room design. We could get accent pillows to match the newly installed California shutters. There are a few pieces at the Art District Gallery in St. Jacobs that we've been eyeing with a view to adding them to our collection.

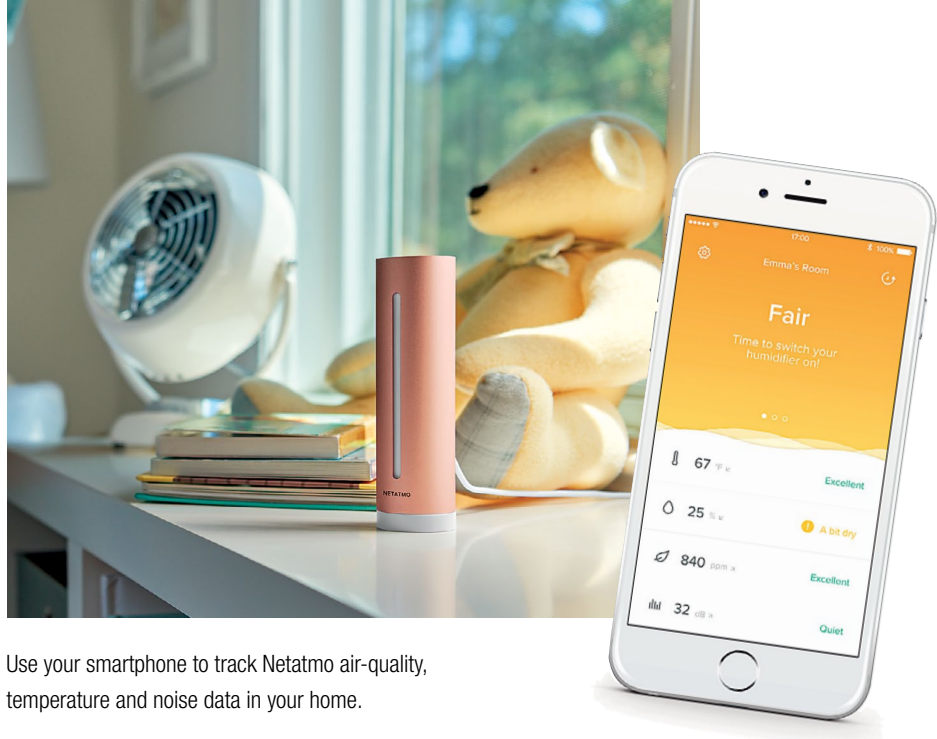
But who are we kidding? We share our home with three girls under the age of nine and they seem to relish destroying things. Peeling paint off walls, drawing on any and every surface, somehow taking doors off their hinges. (I still cannot figure that one out.)

I now understand why my parents were so happy when my brother and I moved out. They could finally decorate the way they wanted without fear.

While my kids are getting older, there has been a recent baby boom in my group of friends. In the spirit of new and upcoming bundles of joy – and destruction – here are some home-tech suggestions for parents.

CREATING A HEALTHIER ENVIRONMENT

As an overly cautious first-time dad, I found myself constantly checking to see if my newborn daughter was breathing. What I did not think to check was what she was breathing. The air quality in our homes can vary for a number of reasons. The changing of the seasons to the frequency of furnace cleanings all have an impact.



Use your smartphone to track Netatmo air-quality, temperature and noise data in your home.



Alex Kinsella

But how can you tell what is in the air? This is where the Netatmo Healthy Home Coach comes in. Like any respectable smart home device, it is loaded with sensors. Netatmo tracks the humidity, air quality, temperature and even the decibels in the room in which it's placed.

The Netatmo app – available for iPhone and Android smartphones – provides real-time air quality information. For nurseries, the Healthy Home Coach can provide tips for making adjustments to help your little one get a better nap. Better naps equal happier parents.

Beyond the nursery, you can connect several Healthy Home Coach devices to monitor all your rooms in one app. This allows you to have a whole-home view and get the most of the time you spend indoors. The Netatmo can be purchased from your favourite online retailer for \$119.99 or from their site www.netatmo.com.

MAKE YOUR OWN COFFEE TABLE BOOKS

Whether it is my iPhone or my Canon

Rebel T3i, I always have a camera with me. I am the official photographer for family reunions, birthdays and pretty much any occasion where there's a memory to be captured.

The downside to this is the thousands of photos spread across iCloud photo storage, external hard drives and memory cards. Printing them at the photo station of a big-box store can take up an entire weekend. An alternative solution is to create photo books of all your special events.

The most customizable option is by using Blurb. My first Blurb book was our wedding album. Instead of getting a traditional album, we used Blurb to create one volume containing both our official photos and table camera pictures.

It is tough to beat the choices this company offers. Blurb lets you customize the cover type (hardcover, softcover or dustjacket), size (from 7x7 inches to 13x11 inches) and the paper type.

You do not have to be a professional typesetter to create a Blurb book. As a first-timer, you can create a book right in your browser. Do you or a family member use an iPad as your primary device? Blurb offers an app for iPhone or iPad to create simple photo books right from your camera roll.

If you are comfortable downloading an application, they offer their own in-house

tool, Bookwright, for both Mac and Windows-based computers. There is even a plug-in for the professional design software Adobe InDesign. Blurb books and tools can be downloaded from blurb.ca.

While Blurb is a great tool, the process of getting to a final book is not always easy. The variety of options in paper type and design can put you in a state of choice overload. Chatbooks has designed a service to break through this wall.

Chatbooks is an app for your iOS or Android smartphone that automatically creates, orders and ships you a book of your photos. There is no need to select which photos to include or to pick a page layout.

With Chatbooks, you simply choose a book style and then start taking photos. A photo book is created for you every time you post 60 photos to Instagram or Facebook. You can also set Chatbooks to create a book when you like 60 photos in your smartphone's camera roll.

Chatbooks sends you an alert when your

book is ready for review. Once you approve the book, Chatbooks prints and ships it to your door. You can learn more at <https://chatbooks.com>. I highly recommend you watch their explainer video at their site.

MAKE OUTSIDE NEW AGAIN

The air is better in your home. The coffee table in your living room is piled with beautiful photo books. Now is a good time to get the kids to play outside, but they are not interested. Vancouver-based Biba is tackling the problem of getting your kids off their iPads and back into the playground.

Biba is a selection of apps for iOS and Android smartphones that allow you to create interactive games using your local playground. To give Biba a try, I downloaded Biba Butterfly Bounty to my iPhone. I then rounded up two of my kids and my niece and headed to the playground.

Biba is not an augmented reality app where your child runs around the swings with your phone. The parent selects what

equipment is available. Our playground has a twisty slide, straight slide, monkey bars and swings. Biba Butterfly Bounty takes those selections and creates a game where your kids have to use the playground to advance in the game while you are in control of the smartphone.

It took a few tries to get used to the game play, but within 10 minutes the kids were running back and forth between the playground and me to mark their progress. Each game lets you select the available playground equipment and offers different challenges. There is even one that is like a junior version of Indiana Jones. Biba works with any local playground and can also be used with your own backyard play set.

Whether it is the indoors or the outdoors, these are just some of the innovative tech solutions for getting the most from your space.

Alex Kinsella has been part of Waterloo Region's tech community since 2004 and is always looking for the next great gadget (or tacos, if it's Tuesday). Find him on Twitter at [@alexkinsella](https://twitter.com/alexkinsella)

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